

# RECITALS AND REMINISCENCES.

## Stories Eminently Worth Telling of Experiences and Adventures in the Great National Struggle.

### McCLELLAN DRAGOONS.

**Notes on Early Days of Cavalry.**  
Editor National Tribune: I have always been, and expect to continue till my last day, a constant reader of the soldiers' paper. The National Tribune, and have long been on the lookout for a chance to "butt in." Now one offers, and here I am.

Lieut. Kemper, 10th N. Y. Cav., in his "Early Days of Cavalry," says: "The Chicago Dragoons, commanded by Charles W. Barker, numbering 110 men . . . were mustered out in September, 1861," etc., etc. The facts in the case are, the Dragoons were mustered in April 19, 1861, and claimed to be the first volunteer cavalry accepted during the war, for three months. At the expiration of the three months, in July, they were mustered out in West Virginia, at a place called "The Headquarters," Capt. Barker made a depot and stored his equipments, left a guard

### Military Executions.

Editor National Tribune: I read in your last issue an account of a double military execution of soldiers for desertion. It brought to my mind the execution of two soldiers by hanging at Yorktown, Va., in the Spring of 1863. At that time my regiment, the 68th N. Y., was attached to Gen. Burested's Brigade, First Division, Fourth Corps, commanded by Gen. E. D. Keyes. It is a long time ago, but the incident made such an impression on my mind that I can still see the scaffold standing and almost hear the drop fall. As our regiment formed guard around the scaffold I thought then, with many of my comrades, that at that time a better use could be made of Union soldiers. I am sure a majority of the boys thought the penalty too severe for the crime. I know that the officers took precautions not to let the news of the hanging reach the North. There was a paper published at the fort called the Yorktown Cavalier, and the issues with account of hanging was taken from the soldiers' and also from the regimental mail-bags.



"SUB-TERRA SHELLS COMMENCED EXPLODING UNDER OUR HORSES' SHOES."

with them, and returned with his men to Chicago. He recruited a new company, containing many of his old command, while others of their number entered other commands, in higher positions, and some of them made a distinction. Geo. A. Forsyth, "Sandy," I believe was Corporal in the three months command. All close readers of the annals of the war know something of his career, especially of his last battle. He still lives, I believe, and if necessary can vouch for at least some of our dragoon comrades.

With the new company Barker returned to his depot in West Virginia. The date of the muster of this company, now the 12th N. Y. Dragoon, (the Chicago Dragoons), was Aug. 2, 1861. They mounted with the old equipments, and wearing the old uniforms, gray jackets, rode as a company under very strict discipline to Washington, where they immediately went on duty at McClellan's headquarters, as escort, mounted orderlies, messengers, etc.

It was soon manifest that 100 men were not sufficient for this duty. So Gen. McClellan instructed Capt. Barker to return to Illinois and see if he could procure 100 more as competent men and good horsemen as he then commanded. If so, he would commission him as Major.

As the Chicago papers of the date said, Barker selected his 102 men from a great number, and selected so well that when he reported to headquarters with them they were not required to pass any surgical examination—all the formula being holding up their hands and "mustering in."

At the date of the second company for three years' enlistment was Oct. 22, 1861. The date of the organization of the squadron of two companies was Nov. 1, 1861. Here is where Capt. Shears comes in. He was a private in the first three years company, and was Captain of Co. A of the squadron. He commanded the 12th Ill. Cav. on the field of Gettysburg, and doubt handled it as well as any regiment on that day. David C. Brown, First Sergeant of the first three-years company, was Captain of Co. B, McClellan Dragoons. Barker commanded the squadron as Major, until at Harrison's Landing, in July, 1862, where he resigned.

The squadron accompanied McClellan to the Peninsula in March, 1862. When the Johnnies evacuated Yorktown, Gen. Stoneman borrowed the Dragoons, as he tried to in every emergency, and sent them at the head of his column took to the rear of the Union Sunday morning, May 4. As soon as we rode through the rebel works sub-terra shells commenced exploding under our horses' feet, and we were shot dead, and several horses went down.

As escort, messengers, etc., we were on every one of the Peninsula fields. McClellan loaned his mounted escort to ride with Gen. Franklin to Bull Run No. 2 with Gen. Franklin. We rode with our beloved chief to Washington and Antietam, and well remember that great winter service. McClellan and Burnside rode together in advance of the staff and escort, going south, and we were informed while standing to horse that winter service, McClellan that was our last ride with McClellan as commander of the Army of the Potomac.

The command was stayed at headquarters through Burnside's ill-starred command.

The 4th day of March, 1863, soon after Hooker assumed command, a career of blunders as commander of the great army, the McClellan Dragoons, with Capt. Shears and Brown still commanding, bidding adieu to the headquarters which they had so long been attached, rode over to Potomac Creek Landing, and from there to the 12th Ill. Cav., and from A and B McClellan Dragoons became Co. H and I, 12th Ill. Cav.

This statement of facts from one who might say all of which I saw, and part of which I was, is at the disposal of the Editor. The object of putting the truth on record is all that prompted its recital. J. Mark Potts, Antler, Mo.

I have given this personal narrative to show that I was in the fight from start to finish. I fired about 200 shots from my rifle.

Many things that I mention now must be given from testimony. Much of what Capt. Rice has written was the work of the imagination, and he has said cannot be substantiated from testimony at all. I have read the most that has been written about the fight. Capt. Rice's book came out in 1882, not in 1883, as he says. I reviewed the book at the time, and had an interesting correspondence with Gen. Cox concerning the correctness of the facts and statements. I also had some interesting letters from Gen. Porter, of Tennessee, who was the Chief of Gen. Cheatham's staff, and Gen. Porter both confirmed my opinion on several points. Their testimony was worth more than any opinion that might be expressed by our men. They viewed the battle from its front, and in a few minutes after our men crossed the river.

When I wrote my account of the fight more than 23 years ago, I had this to say concerning Opdycke's men: "All unite in praising Opdycke and Opdycke and his brigade unqualified praise for their part in the battle. The praise they have received was fairly won."

That was my opinion 40 years ago, 20 years ago, and it is my opinion today. But I think Capt. Rice's claim that "Opdycke's men, unaided, retook and restored the line" is posterior. I heartily agree with the Captain that "the general sentiment at the time was the best criterion." It certainly was the sentiment of the Second and Third Brigades at the time that they were in the heat of the fight, not simply in the retreat, but in the contest with the rebels. I never heard the question of their being present raised until Gen. Cox's book came out 18 years after the battle. Gen. Cox, in speaking of the two brigades, says: "The two brigades, the disorganized brigades at the river, but they were not again carried into the fight. This statement called out the correspondence of the two brigades, and I now look at the actual situation just before the rebels make their charge. Strickland's and Reilly's brigades were on the right, and the side of the picket. Opdycke's Brigade lay a short distance in the rear, as a reserve. Wagner's other two brigades lay in front of the picket line, and were not carried into the fight. The two brigades of the Twenty-third Corps and Wagner's two brigades had fallen back 25 or 30 yards. This is certainly true of Wagner's men. Capt. Opdycke's Brigade was charged by the rebels to restore the line. Here, then, were five brigades in the vicinity of the picket, and some of them, or all of them, were carried into the fight. I believe that two of those brigades extricated themselves from that confused mass and quietly retired to the rear. The other three brigades restored the line. Capt. Rice would have us believe that one brigade, Opdycke's, extricated itself from that mass and restored the line, "alone, unaided." I suppose that men from all five of the brigades restored the line? If the honor of restoring the line does not belong to the five brigades, then not much of the honor belong to the two brigades that suffered most heavily? The question of loss is an argument absolutely incontestable. Let us examine it. I suppose that Gen. Cox had access to the official records and gives them correctly. He says that the Union loss was 2,226, and adds that more than 1,000 were in the two brigades. Where did these two brigades suffer this loss, a loss almost as great as all the rest of the army together? They were in the front of the line, and were the first to be killed. Had they been in the rear, they certainly did not lose the men in front of the line. There was no firing that amounted to a skirmish until the rebels got practically up to our works. The Confederates were trying to reach the works as soon as they could. They were not coming to anything, and those of us retreating were otherwise engaged. As an eyewitness of the movement I was absolutely sure that the brigades did not suffer any considerable loss. More than 20 years ago I wrote to Gov. James D. Porter, of Tennessee, the Chief of Gen. Porter's staff, asking him whether on the morning of the battle there were any Federal dead or wounded any distance in front of the works, and whether the Confederates captured any considerable number of Wagner's men. He replied that there were no dead or wounded of the Federal army any distance in front of the works, and that Wagner's two brigades lost but a trifling number of men in the retreat. Making his statement more specific, he added that the Confederates down their arms and surrendered. A few days later, after he had conferred with Gen. Porter, he wrote me again, saying that in Gen. Porter's opinion Wagner's loss in front of the works was more insignificant than he had estimated it. Gen. Cheatham also says that his command lost no men until they got within 50 yards of the works.

Wagner's perfectly plain, then, that Wagner's two brigades did not sustain any

loss to speak of in front of the works. They could not have lost any men had they been in the rear of the line. How is it then, that the two brigades lost nearly as many men as all the rest of the army? It can only be accounted for on the ground that they bore the brunt of the fighting. With such fury in the vicinity of the picket, of course, I believe that the other brigades mentioned were also there. I may say that the two brigades did the work, and no officers pretended to give command. I doubt whether any company officer in my part of the line could have mustered and moved his company. The officers did good work, however, in carrying ammunition.

Gen. Cox says that Reilly's Division captured two flags at Opdycke's. He asserts that this statement was verified. My private opinion is that Conrad's and Lane's Brigades were too busy to pick up the flags, and that the two brigades from the Carter House back to the works I would not have picked up a flag had there been a dozen under my feet.

Chaplain Van Horne, who sustained the closest relations to Gen. Thomas, and doubtless often reflected the opinion of the great commander, says, in describing the battle: "The quick formation of Lane's Brigade in the works, the gallant action of Opdycke and his brigade, and the extreme stubborn resistance of all the troops in line of battle."

This, I believe, will be the verdict of history. V. W. Gist, Co. D, 26th Ohio, Cedar Falls, Iowa.

**An Andersonville Prisoner.**  
Editor National Tribune: I am an old subscriber to your very interesting paper, and have enjoyed it ever since I came to it. I have not been on your roll for quite a number of years. I am not a deserter, but absent without leave, and I am sure that my subscription as soon as practicable.

I expect to go to Andersonville next month, to be present at the dedication of the Pennsylvania Monument. I was Captain of the 10th N. Y. Dragoon, and I was in the famous spring. I wrote an item several years ago, and sent it to The National Tribune, which was published in the 10th N. Y. Dragoon. I was well to tell it again. I got permission to dig a well, and located it on the north side about 80 feet from the stockade. We dug the well about 20 feet deep before commencing our tunnel, which was commenced about 12 feet from the surface. We were digging the tunnel and the well in the night, and digging well in daylight. After digging about 40 feet we found that we were no near the surface, as we could hear the creek, and the well was not to be dug from the branch for water all hours of the night. We could not have been more than two and a half feet from the surface. We commenced digging a downward grade. After going 70 feet from the well, and nearing the stockade, the one digging in the tunnel found a hole, and reported the earth very moist. We then dug the well, and it was correct, thinking that we might change our course and avoid the moisture. I heard water running near by. I took a piece of cloth, and with a tool we had to dig with, and thrust it in where the sound came from. Immediately the water came rushing out. I lost no time in getting the water, and it was reported. This was about 2 a. m. We waited until about 4 a. m., for the water to make its way through the tunnel. Then we dug the well, and it was correct, thinking that we might change our course and avoid the moisture. I heard water running near by. I took a piece of cloth, and with a tool we had to dig with, and thrust it in where the sound came from. Immediately the water came rushing out. I lost no time in getting the water, and it was reported. This was about 2 a. m. 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